

TREATING OUR EVANGELICAL ALLERGY

Formed in Christ: What is the good news?

2 Corinthians 2:14-17; 1 Peter 3:15-16

This summer at our denominational assembly in Pittsburgh,
André Gingerich Stoner,
head of interchurch relations for Mennonite Church USA,
gave us a memorable line,
He said, “Mennonites love service, flirt with peace,
and are allergic to evangelism.”

This morning I’d like us to think about *why* we’re allergic,
and whether that’s even a *problem*,
and if it *is* a problem, what we might do about it.

I assume that some of you here would say
having an allergic reaction to being evangelistic is *not* a problem.
You might even wear your anti-evangelicalism
as an Anabaptist badge of honor.

It’s not uncommon to describe ourselves as Mennonites
as being entirely distinct from evangelicals,
as well as Catholics and mainline Protestants.
We’re not *like* them. We’re *different*.

There are some logical, and actually very well-grounded reasons,
why we distinguish ourselves from evangelicals as a group.
I *myself* make that distinction at times.

Evangelical Christians . . . as a category or a group . . .
tend to emphasize certain doctrines in ways we *don’t*,
or at least, we express them differently, we nuance them.

We could put it *this* way (although it’s grossly oversimplifying things):
Evangelicals say the Bible is inerrant and speaks plainly.
Anabaptists say scripture is authoritative
as the community interprets it together.

Evangelicals say salvation is primarily

an intentional and rational “decision for Christ.”
Anabaptists don’t deny the need to decide,
but speak of salvation *primarily* as
a wholistic and lifelong journey toward shalom.

Evangelicals hope to transform society into a Christian nation.
Anabaptists want to influence society by an alternative community,
demonstrating, from the margins, what kingdom life looks like.

There’s also personal and emotional reasons for distancing ourselves
from evangelicals.
We hear way too many evangelical celebrities—
in politics, in sports, in entertainment—
speaking as if for all Christians,
with speech that’s political, divisive, sometimes even hateful.
We see evangelical TV preachers with loud suits and big hair,
getting pushy and pompous about the Gospel,
and begging for money.

There are valid reasons why we break out in hives, so to speak,
if someone suggests we are evangelical.

You can probably tell where this is heading.
I’m about to give the other side,
why we need to get over this allergy.
So if you’re right now starting to break out,
I want to offer some antihistamine.

I want to make a case that the allergy we suffer from
is *not* a matter of pride,
but a symptom of a larger pathology,
and is actually quite treatable.

In fact, with proper treatment,
we could leave this place enthusiastically committed
to be evangelists for Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God.

There are two theological assumptions I’m working from.
And these are both deeply Christian, deeply Anabaptist.

First, God is on a mission to save and redeem and heal this world.
Second, God has called out a people to participate in that mission.
I don't see how *anyone* can read the scriptures,
and not find those two affirmations at the heart of it all.

God wants to save, heal, redeem, and reconcile,
and God calls us, the church, to proclaim and demonstrate
that ministry of salvation, healing, redemption, and reconciliation.

The church is expected, is commissioned,
to proclaim God's salvation,
and demonstrate the saved life.
We heard one version of that commission in the Gospel reading today.

All peoples of the world are invited into a new, saved life.
Saved from a self-serving, destructive, violent,
and fragmented *existence* that often *passes* for life.
Saved from sin that cuts us off from our Creator who loves us.
Saved *back* to God's loving embrace.
It's a salvation offered freely . . . without coercion.

And the church is the bearer of that good news.
We don't *have* to live a half-life or non-life.
We can live fully and joyfully and freely as
the whole human beings God lovingly created us to be.

That's the good message we have for the world,
a message to be shared in word, in deed, in life.

That's what evangelism is, *literally*.

The word evangel has two parts.

The first two letters, E-V, come from the Greek for "good"

The rest of the letters spells *what*—"angel."

Also from the Greek, for "messenger."

An evangelist is literally someone with a good message.

Evangelism is the practice of sharing that good message.

An evangelical is one who thinks it's a good idea

to share a good message, if we *have* one.

The question of whether Christians *ought* to be evangelical, or not,

is not even a *question* . . .

if we accept the most basic theological affirmations of our Bible:

God is on a mission to save and redeem the world.

God's saving mission was revealed in Jesus.

And we are called to carry on the ministry and message of Jesus.

It's a complete non-sequitur to suggest
that we accept the most basic story of scripture
and *still* think that Christians ought not to be evangelical.

Maybe Christians who dismiss evangelism
are only dismissing evangelism, defined *narrowly*.
I least, I hope so.

Maybe they're objecting to the politics of some evangelicals,
or to some attention-seeking evangelical celebrities,
or to certain pushy, judgmental evangelists.
At least I hope not *too* many of us actually have trouble believing
we *have* a good message to share.

Assuming we *do* believe we've been entrusted with the good message
that God loves the world and wants to save it,
the *real* question is not *whether*, but *how* we share the good message.
Isn't that the main question?

How or how *not* to evangelize.

The message is good, but the way it is shared might be ineffective,
or might even turn the good message into a bad one.

So how might we be good sharers of a good message?

How might we be cured of our allergy to evangelism,
and embrace the opportunity we all have
to be authentic and winsome bearers of the Gospel.

I suggest we start by putting the whole topic of evangelism
under the rubric of Christian formation.

Evangelism is not an optional focus for the missionary-minded,
or for those with a special spiritual gift.

It is central to our being "formed in Christ."

It is *just* as essential to the journey of becoming a follower of Jesus,
as is, say, practicing the spiritual disciplines
of worship, prayer, fellowship, discernment,
service, justice-seeking, and peace-building.

Ben Campbell Johnson wrote a book a few years ago entitled,
Speaking of God: Evangelism as Initial Spiritual Guidance.
I didn't read the book *myself*, but Roland Kuhl,
a friend and fellow Mennonite pastor from Chicago,
wrote some extensive reflections on the book this fall,
so I'm drawing on his reflections.

Campbell Johnson based his idea of evangelism as spiritual guidance
(or you might say Christian formation),
on the whole notion that God is already active in the world,
and most *importantly*, already active in every person's life.

We don't *ever* walk into a conversation, or interaction,
or relationship with *any* other person, no matter *who* it is,
thinking that we are somehow introducing God *into* that situation.
That we are bringing God to that person or people.
A fundamentally important understanding,
if we want to have integrity or authenticity
in sharing the good message of God,
is . . . *that God got there before we did*.

As we are walking toward that person,
we are walking toward *God*.
Wow. What a *concept*.
That ought to strike awe and reverence
into every human interchange we have.

As my friend Roland reflects on that, he paints a picture
of what evangelism as spiritual guidance could *look* like.

Here I quote him,
“[When I] engage people in conversation—
as to what they are reading, what is going on in their lives,
even chit-chat about how they are,
with an awareness of God being active in their lives,

[it] enables me to converse with them prayerfully.
It attunes me to listen more closely to what they are expressing,
what experiences they are sharing,
rather than finding a place to break into the conversation
with my story, with my agenda.

In listening,
I am developing an awareness to notice
how God is active in their lives.
[Then] I have the freedom to *name* God's presence in them
'it seems like you had a God-moment there' or
'it seems that God was guiding you in that.'”

He said, in comments like that,
“[I'm] noticing that
God is doing something significant in their lives—
yet I really don't expect a response from them.
However, invariably a response comes—'what do you *mean*?' . . .
Then I am able to respond with how I notice
God at work in them in a particular situation,
helping them to see or discover God at work in them.”

Evangelism is really a way to accompany people, to walk alongside.
It's listening carefully and reverently.
It's observing tentatively and hopefully.
It's looking for God, and *finding* God, and pointing out God.

Whether the evangelist is one person, or the whole church,
we listen *first*, and listen *well*.
We notice the work of God in the world,
and walk toward it,
hoping to participate in it.
We go through life *asking* the God question,
engaging in God-speech.
Noticing, asking, suggesting how we might see God at work,
even in the brokenness around us.

We don't just storm in with answers . . .
to questions that aren't being *asked*.
We accompany people.
We listen, we observe.

We suggest where we see hope in the world.

And inevitably, we'll be asked to explain.
That's *precisely* what the apostle said in 1 Peter 3,
which we read this morning:
“Always be ready to make your defense
to anyone who demands from you an accounting
for the hope that is in you;
yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

Trust me, in this broken and sinful and cynical world,
that's grasping for any shred of hope . . .
a community of people who live in joyful hope *will* stick out.
Communities that embody hope will attract attention.
They will elicit conversation.
They will be asked.
They will be challenged.
They *will*, as scripture suggested,
be demanded for an account of the hope that is in them.
And they will need to explain.

And as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 2,
another one of this morning's texts,
As Christ leads us together in procession through the world
a fragrance will be spread.
“We are the aroma of Christ . . .
among those who are being saved
and among those who are perishing.”
When we carry that fragrance, Paul says,
“We are not peddlers of God's word like so many;
but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity,
as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.”

A fragrant community of Christ
need not engage in salesmanship or hype or clever marketing.
Hope is embodied.
Hope is incarnated.
Good news is demonstrated . . . and proclaimed with authenticity,
when people stand in the presence of God.

As I've said many times, and will say again,
my dream for the PVMC community,
is that every member of this community
will be deeply involved in the life of smaller communities of faith
within the larger whole—
“a community of communities engaged in God's mission.”
And in each small community we will
actively and mutually shape each other
for an evangelical life as an authentic disciple of Jesus in this world.

My dream is that each one of these communities
will so vibrate with life and joy and hope,
and will be so open to the world around them,
so hospitable, so compassionate,
so filled with love for each other and for their neighbor,
that anyone in their vicinity cannot *help* but notice.

Our neighbors will be blown away by the beauty
of such a missional and communal and hopeful life.
The aroma of the living Christ will be
so compelling and so attractive,
that the seeking public will engage us,
and we will be ready
with an explanation for the hope that is within us.

These incarnational, evangelical communities
will take all kinds of shapes.
One size does *not* fit all.
A missional community living in downtown Harrisonburg
will look quite *different* than one located in north Park View,
which will look different than one in Belmont or Hidden Meadow.

This has to do with the question of neighborhood,
that we were discussing at our congregation meeting last week.

I dream of a congregation filled with these evangelical communities
living out the good message in their own particular neighborhood.

Communities that renew that time-honored practice of hospitality,
inviting even strangers into our homes for dinner.

Communities that practice
grass-roots justice and peace-building.

We don't need to outsource that to social service agencies.

We can be evangelistic

by practicing love and mercy and justice as small communities,
bathing our actions in a life of prayer and spiritual discernment.

We have neighbors right here in Harrisonburg

who suffer from injustice,

who are victims of violence,

who are exposed to the elements,

who are hungry,

who need the touch of a healing God

embodied in a loving community of Jesus' disciples.

I dream of communities that make it a priority to meet together
to discern, *mutually*, where and how God is moving around them,
and how they might embody in their ordinary lives,
the good message of the Gospel.

I dream of a congregation made up *entirely* of
evangelical, incarnational expressions of Christ's body.

Communities committed to being the fragrance of life

to the world around us—first of all to ourselves,

but also to our near neighbors,

and to our larger community,

and to the systems of power at work, locally and nationally,

and to the hurting world *beyond* our borders.

If we grasp, even in part, the beauty of the good message

God has entrusted to us,

how can we *possibly* keep that to ourselves?

In the words of hymn writer Michael Mahler,

"How can we be silent?"

How can we be silent when we know our God is near,
bringing light to those in darkness, to the worthless endless worth?

How can we be silent when we are the voice of Christ,
speaking justice to the nations, breathing love to all the earth?

How can we be silent when our souls are filled with awe
at the beauty of creation and the mercy of our Lord?

How can we be silent when we yearn to sing new songs?

In our hearts a fire is burning and it will not be ignored!

None can stop the Spirit burning now inside us.

We will shape the future. We will not be silent!

—Phil Kniss, October 30, 2011